

# Nearly 300 workers infected in COVID-19 outbreak at Northampton sandwich factory

**Paul Bond**  
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In the latest outbreak associated with food processing, nearly 300 workers at the Greencore sandwich factory in Northampton, England tested positive for COVID-19 last week. Over a week after the outbreak, management were finally forced to close the plant for 14 days, yesterday afternoon.

Northampton, already on a coronavirus watchlist, has the highest rate of new cases in England and could be subjected to a local lockdown. Yet, although a lockdown was being discussed for the entire town with a population of over 215,000, management, the local authorities and the trade unions did everything possible to keep the factory operational—endangering the lives and safety of the more than 2,000 people employed there and the local population.

Nearly 14 percent of the factory's total workforce of 2,100 have now tested positive. This has contributed to Northampton having the highest rate of new infections in England: nearly 117 in every 100,000 residents, compared to an average in England of 12 in every 100,000. This spike centres on the Moulton area, around the Greencore factory.

Convenience food manufacturer Greencore's factory produces sandwiches for high-end retailer Marks & Spencer. Founded in 1991, the firm is a major supplier to British and Irish supermarkets, and the largest sandwich manufacturer in the world.

Standard National Health Service testing initially revealed 79 workers at the Northampton plant with coronavirus. Following these results, Greencore launched its own private testing, turning up a further 213 positive results. The company confirmed that "a number of colleagues have tested positive ... and are now self-isolating."

Workers were left in desperate straits. According to the Bakers Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU), the "majority" of Greencore's self-isolating workers, who are

paid weekly, are only receiving Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) during their absence. They are being paid just £95.85 per week for the 10 days of self-isolation.

Some workers with a full-time job have been forced to turn to foodbanks and others have been evicted after struggling to pay rent. This has led to concerns that workers may not self-isolate when symptomatic because they cannot afford to live on this reduced income.

When the pandemic began, some Greencore employees sought advice on shielding vulnerable family members. They were told they could use their company sick pay for this, leaving concerns about what would happen if they used it up and then became ill themselves.

The company, which saw share prices fall in the days after the outbreak, said that sick pay on offer ranges from full pay to SSP, "depending on the type of contract." In practice, factory floor workers are on contracts offering only SSP. The union has noted that they are thus "treated differently to the managers enjoying full company sick pay." Criticism properly belongs with the unions that negotiated those contracts in the first place.

Greencore said that "in recognition of the financial impact" on those eligible only for SSP, it had decided to give all weekly-paid workers an additional attendance payment of £400. This is only their agreed end-of-year bonus paid early, so workers will not even have that usual cushion in December.

The situation confirms that the government's ad hoc testing system is not fit for purpose. More than two-thirds of the Greencore cases were identified by Greencore's private testing. The company then used the result as an argument against closure!

At the beginning of the pandemic, Greencore did not even notify workers or instigate wider testing when a manager tested positive. By contrast, Greencore sacked two employees for travelling to work together when one was suffering from COVID-19.

Despite the mass outbreak of cases, the local Conservative council gave the plant the green light to continue operations. Lucy Wightman, director of public health at Northamptonshire County Council, declared that the Food Standards Agency and Public Health England “are assured there is no risk to any of the produce” made at the factory. She claimed, “It is evident that Greencore has highly effective measures in place and they continue to work extremely hard to exceed the requirements needed to be COVID-19 secure within the workplace.”

The main concern of Jonathan Nunn, leader of the Conservative council, was to avoid any lockdown. He expressed concern simply with “the impact [the outbreak has] had on our [coronavirus] statistics.”

The company said it is “liaising closely with PHE [Public Health England] East Midlands, Northamptonshire County Council and Northampton Borough Council, who are all fully supportive of the controls that we have on site.”

Greencore insisted its factories have “wide-ranging social distancing measures, stringent hygiene procedures and regular temperature checking in place.”

The criteria for judging the effectiveness of health measures clearly have nothing to do with their actual effectiveness. Wightman pointed to the “high number of cases over the last four weeks” across the town but laid the onus on workers to “‘act now’ to follow additional measures.”

Wightman said it is “about how people behave outside of Greencore, not at work.”

This position was supported by the BFAWU. The union’s regional officer, George Attwall, said the problem “boils back down to education”—of the workers. He blamed workers’ activities outside the factory, with “lots of members car-sharing, lots of members ... living in the same household with the whole family working in the factory.”

These are the realities of workers’ lives, with Greencore one of the biggest employers locally. Suggesting that workers are somehow responsible for these conditions reveals everything about the unions as mouthpieces for the corporations.

The union pro-company agenda was clear earlier this month when Greencore began reopening sites closed during the lockdown and extending production at Northampton. With workers furloughed, Greencore began by recruiting agency workers to meet demand. Instead of opposing reopening under unsafe conditions, the union said the firm should “bring back our members first before

any agency come on site.”

BFAWU opposed any fight to close the plant until it was safe to return even though one of its own convenors, Nicolae Macari, was one of those who tested positive. He works at Greencore alongside his wife, his mother and father, his brother and his sister-in-law. All six have tested positive and are in self-isolation together.

The level of backing they have received from BFAWU and other unions was acknowledged by Greencore, who said they are “in constant contact with unions at every stage of this process” and are “committed to working with them in close partnership during this hugely challenging time for our people.”

Food processing factories continue to be a focus for outbreaks. An outbreak of at least 43 cases this week in Coupar Angus, Perthshire, Scotland saw soldiers mobilised to test all 900 employees of the 2 Sisters chicken factory there. In June, the 2 Sisters chicken factory in Llangefni on Anglesey was forced to close after at least 216 were infected—nearly half the workforce.

Scottish National Party First Minister Nicola Sturgeon did not rule out a local lockdown in Coupar Angus but stressed that this would be a last resort. In its drive to reopen schools, the Scottish government has demonstrated that it shares the same concern for restoring the generation of profit as its counterpart in Westminster.

The Greencore outbreak, as with the others at food processing plants across the UK demonstrates that the fight against coronavirus is not primarily a medical question but a political one. It demands that workers oppose the homicidal back to work agenda of the ruling class and their partners in the trade unions. Workers must build independent rank-and-file committees, linking the fight for workplace safety with the transformation of society on a socialist basis.



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